

Palisade Historical Society
Oral and Video History Project
Interview

Oral & Video History #21

Date: 04/15/2016

Place: History Center, 311 S. Main St. Palisade, CO

Length: 1h.:20m

Interviewee: Thelma Rose Pahler Hays

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The text in *italics* is not part of the original video content and is added for clarification.

Family:

Thelma was born 04/06/1930 in Crested Butte, Colorado in the same house and same bedroom where her mother was born. Her father was Frederich C. Pahler, born 12/06/1898 in Dortman, Germany and died in 1953 in Cameo, Colorado. Thelma's mother was Rosa Frankie Meritt, born 06/19/1907 in Crested Butte and was living in Clifton, Colorado at the time of her passing on 06/23/1983.

Thelma had two sisters and one brother – Mary Ann (Varnes) born 03/25/1932, Freida Elizabeth (Gannoni) born August 1, 1936, and Frederich C. Pahler, born in 1943. Thelma married Herbert H. Hays on 01/27/1953 in Denver, Colorado. He was born 03/19/1930 in Leadore, Idaho. Thelma and Herb have four children – Sandra Lee Hays Sells (died 01/05/2002), William Myrle Hays of Grand Junction, H. Jack Hays of Grand Junction, and Kip A. Hays, working in Williston, North Dakota.

Thelma's paternal grandmother, was Marle Hays. Her maternal grandmother, Frankie Meritt, died in the birth of her mother. Her maternal grandfather was John Meritt, born in Minchinhampton, England. Both grandparents died in Crested Butte.

Early days at the farm near Cameo:

Thelma's parents were living in Crested Butte in 1929 when all of the banks went broke. Her father came to the Palisade area with other men looking for a place to farm. He found some land near Cameo. Thelma's mother's brother did not have money in the bank at the time of the big crash, so he lent her parents \$400 to buy 17 acres just up the canyon from Cameo. There was no house on the property, so her father hired a man to build a house for \$250. Thelma and her mother stayed in a rented house in Palisade until the house was finished enough to live in. Being near the river, the land was covered with brush and trees, which had to be grubbed out. Thelma's parents acquired another ten acres upriver, known as the Thomas place. Eventually, they planted

1400 or 1500 peach trees on the property. Thelma's sister, Mary Ann, was born there in 1932. She recalled while the doctor was at the house delivering the baby, she was playing with her father's straight razor and cut her face. The doctor had to clean her up and stitch the wound.

The years went by, and Thelma's sister, Freida, was born there. Thelma recalled when Freida was about six months old one day when they were all out working, her father told her to go to the house and start lunch. Thelma had Freida with her, and tied her in a chair near the stove. She had trouble starting the fire in the stove, so as she had seen her mother do, she transferred a little kerosene into the stove. The fire still did not take off, so she jammed the poker into it. Flames exploded in her face, burning off almost all of her hair. There was a pan of dirty dishwater on the stove, so Thelma put her head into it. She had burns on her face, as well. Thelma remembered a hobo came to the house shortly after that and saw Thelma. He asked her mother for some cooking oil, which he applied to the burns on her face. Thelma's face healed, and she had no scars from the incident.

Growing up, Thelma had only her sisters to play with. Family life was good. They hiked, fished, and hunted for rabbits. Thelma loved the life her parents provided them. She never heard her dad speak loudly or raise his voice to their mother.

Thelma first learned to drive an orchard hoopie made out of an old Model A. The roof was cut off and a flatbed was added, which could haul about 20 bushel baskets of peaches. Thelma drove the hoopie around the farm and down to Cameo to get the mail. She recalled you could crank it to get it started. It had an electric starter motor, but you had to hold a screwdriver across the battery terminals, in order to keep the engine running.

In 1943, the year Thelma's brother Fred was born, her father's brother had been working for the railroad but decided he wanted to join them in farming. He bought the upper place, where Thelma now lives. Her father kept the plot of land closer to Cameo, as well.

School in Cameo:

They lived about 1 ½ miles east of Cameo, and having no other children to play with, she and her brother and sisters played together most of the time. When she started school, she had to walk to Cameo, carrying her lunch in a small lard pail. Since there was no water at the school, she had to bring a jar of drinking water from home. There were outdoor toilets at the school – one for the girls and another for the boys.

Thelma recalls during World War II, people did not like her family because of their German heritage. Her father was afraid to teach the children the language, thinking they would be better off not knowing German. One time when Thelma got into a little trouble at school, a teacher gave her a paddling and told her she should go back to Germany where she came from. Another school memory is the Mesa County School Nurse would come to school every week. She would stop at each student's desk and give them a spoonful of cod liver oil – using the same spoon! Thelma still doesn't like the taste of fish.

There were 36 families living in Cameo, and they all seemed to get along with each other for the most part. Thelma was the only student in 1st grade and again the only student in 2nd grade, so the

teacher moved her up to 3rd grade where she could be with other students. The school had a little room for grades 1-4 and a big room for grades 5-9. It was a good system, as the younger students learned from the older ones. Thelma remembers one of the teachers worked in the mine at night and taught school in the daytime. He sometimes fell asleep in his chair, so the kids went down to the river to play, ice skated, hiked, or whatever, and returned to the school at 3:30 to wake up the teacher. When Thelma got to 8th grade, they got new teachers, Mr. and Mrs. Gigax. They were wonderful teachers who worked hard to bring the students up to grade. After 9th grade, they had to go to Palisade to finish high school. Thelma gives the Gigax's a lot of credit for preparing them for continuing on in school in Palisade. Thelma said the Cameo kids were treated like outcasts by the Palisade students, but they all seemed to make it through together.

Mining:

Thelma's father came to the United States from Germany as a miner. Previously, he was in the German army fighting in France when he was 16 years old. A dentist he knew in Germany came to the United States and settled in Cheyenne, Wyoming. He helped Thelma's father immigrate to the United States.

The mines were dangerous places. Thelma remembers the Cameo School was near the mine portal. If there was an accident in the mine, they blew a loud steam whistle, which brought everyone to the mine portal to see who they brought out.

The miners were not paid well and were usually paid by the cars they loaded with coal. The mining company owned the houses and the store. If you owed money to the company store, it was taken out of your paycheck, as well as a fee for medical care. Thelma still has a paystub her father once received for 48 cents.

It was common practice that if a miner was killed, his eldest son was to take his place working in the mine. If he did not do so, the family was given just three days to move out of the company-owned house. The mines had labor problems, and Thelma remembers union men carrying big sticks for fighting at the mine. Thelma's father was a farmer, as well as a miner, but when the Cameo Mine closed, he quit mining.

Other Cameo and Palisade memories:

The town of Cameo got its name from a rock formation that looks like the profile of a cameo face. If you cross the bridge to Cameo, drive past the canal, and look back at the top of the mountain to the east, you can see the cameo. Other rock formations on the Cameo side of the river were known as the Indian Head, the Old Man, and the Witch's Head.

When Thelma was 14 years old, Palisade had a cannery. After school she and a partner drove a truck for the cannery to a railroad siding in Grand Junction where they picked up cans from a railroad car and brought them back to the cannery. The cannery had temporary living quarters for the workers located at the east end of 2nd Street where there is now a cabinet shop.

As youngsters, they rode their bicycles from Cameo to Palisade, where they thinned peaches for 30 cents per hour. School did not start in the fall until harvest was over because everyone was needed to work. In the winter, they sometimes walked from Cameo to Palisade to see the movies.

Since there was no water in the irrigation tunnel (*Government Highline Canal tunnel #3*) during that time of year, they used it to get back and forth to town. Everyone got plenty of exercise and there was no need to go to the gym!

The high school football field used to be where Riverbend Park is now located. During the war, there was a German POW camp in the area, so the prisoners sometimes sat on the fence to watch the ball game. The prisoners were sent back to Germany after the war, but some of them liked living here so much they returned as immigrants.

The Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) Camp was where the German POW's lived. The CCC boys built all of the rock walls around the Roller Dam and tunnels. Unfortunately, all of that beautiful work is crumbling and in disrepair now, due to neglect. Thelma recalled the Gibson family lived at the property adjacent to theirs before her father bought it. They got acquainted with some of the CCC boys, who would come over to on Sundays to sing and play musical instruments. Mrs. Gibson treated them with cake and ice cream.

The country entered World War II during Thelma's later school years, so everyone had food stamps or coupons. She recalls they were allowed only ten pounds of sugar per year and gasoline was rationed. Farmers got five gallons of gas per week, but since there was no extra gas for going places, they stayed home most of the time when they were not in school. Thelma graduated from Palisade High School in 1947.

Post-high school education and work:

After high school, Thelma attended Parks School of Business in Denver. They had a program where students were placed in private homes to work in exchange for room and board. In the home where she was placed, the man was a purchasing agent for the tramway. The woman's mother also lived there, so Thelma had to wake her and give her breakfast in bed. She was expected to do dishes, vacuum the house, and iron clothes. She did not know how to cook fancy foods the family ate – only the farm fare she learned to cook at home. Thelma was never allowed to eat with the family, so she ate alone in the kitchen. Thelma was paid a dollar per week for her work. It cost ten cents per day to ride to school, so there was little money left for anything else.

Thelma grew tired of this arrangement, so she and a fellow student from Delta, Colorado went in together to rent a house for \$10 per week. Thelma recalls this was in January and how cold it was. They had no money left for food and on one occasion went three days without food. Finally, Thelma found work in a restaurant, Boxer's Steak House across from the Capitol, where she made enough money in tips to buy food for the two of them. Thelma worked at waiting tables and finished school. As a waitress, Thelma served a variety of celebrities, TV and movie stars, and musicians. She specifically remembers serving Dwight D. and Mamie Eisenhower, and Mamie's mother, (*Elvira Mathilde (Carlson) Doud.*)

During the time Thelma was attending business school, if there was nothing to do, she and her friends went to the Capitol Building. They sat in the balconies and listened to the proceedings so they could learn how the government worked.

While looking for office work, young women were expected to dress nicely for job interviews. The average salary for such work at the time was \$125 per month. Thelma was making that much money in tips every week plus forty-eight cents per hour, so she never was a secretary after she finished business school. Instead, she did a lot of bookkeeping. She worked for Farmer's Insurance, taking care of the salesmen's commissions. They had no office machines, so everything had to be done by hand. She made only \$135 per month doing this. Then she worked for Lumber Dealers, Inc. for about a year and a half.

At about that time, she had four roommates, and they all went to a club in Denver to try to meet men in the military. They had an arrangement, sort of a game amongst themselves, where the girls would look over the crowd of GI's. Each girl picked one man out, and tried to get him to take her out for coffee after the dance. If you could not get one of the guys to pay attention to you, you had to do everyone's laundry the next week. One night, a group of GI's came in and Thelma eyed a man, went over and stood beside him, and got him to ask her to dance. This man, Herb Hays, turned out to be her future husband – they have now been married for 64 years.

After they married, they moved to Castle Air Force Base in California. It was difficult for women to find jobs there, so Thelma worked for a time peeling tomatoes for a large canning factory. For peeling a large pan of tomatoes, she was paid ten cents, earning about \$3.00 per day.

Returning to Cameo:

When Thelma's father passed away, she and her husband returned to Cameo. Her mother and little brother were alone at the farm. Her uncle passed away about six months later, so Thelma's aunt and their children were alone, as well. They bought the property up the canyon from Thelma's aunt and later got a government loan from the Farmers Home Administration (FHA) to buy the Cameo place which belonged to her mother. They later sold her mother's property to the mine, and it was subsequently sold to Halliburton, the current owners.

Thelma hires only four men in her farming operation, so she does not qualify to use the current migrant worker system. She quipped, "That's what happens when you have lawyers in Washington DC – people who don't know how to walk on dirt!"

Café Caravan:

In 1958, Thelma began working as a waitress at the Café Caravan (*a restaurant formerly located at 1st and Main Streets in Grand Junction*). Herb was working in construction at the time, so they had to juggle working the farm, working at the restaurant, and raising children. During the day, Thelma took care of the children if they were not in school. Then her husband would take care of them at night after he got home from work when Thelma had to leave for work at the restaurant. They had only one car, so she drove into Grand Junction after her husband got off work and came home after getting off work at 2:00 a.m. They did this for six years.

When Thelma became pregnant with their youngest son, Kip, she was offered a hostess job at the restaurant. Then she was asked to manage the restaurant. Thelma remarked the restaurant hired another manager prior to her getting the job, but he did not work out. They were paying him \$600/month, but when Thelma took over the job, she was paid \$500/month for doing the same work. Nevertheless, Thelma learned a lot about the food business through experience. She

worked on salary plus commission and used the money to buy into the company until she owned 25% of it. Finally, they were earning enough money Herb could afford to quit working construction and be a full time farmer. It was a good experience for all of them. The children helped out both at the farm and in the restaurant and learned the value of hard work. When the oil shale bust came along in 1985, they sold the restaurant.

In her involvement with the Cafe Caravan, Thelma hosted all sorts of service clubs in the community, including the Quarterback Club, Lions Club, Rotary Club, Kiwanis Club, and American Business Women's Club. They also served the Kannah Creek Cowbells, a cattlemen's group, and a beet growers group. She helped start the Knife and Fork Club, which held meetings at the Caravan until the organization grew too big and had to move out to one of the bigger hotels.

Thelma recalled serving John F. Kennedy before he announced his candidacy for President. He had dinner at the Cafe Caravan with a group of Democratic women known as the Jane Jefferson Club. Thelma remembered having an eerie feeling when she heard him speak – he sounded like a preacher in a trance.

People who Thelma worked with still stop by the fruit stand to see her. She has helped some immigrants who worked for her with their paperwork so they could become US Citizens.

Mt. Garfield Fruit Stand:

Thelma and Herb bought the fruit stand on Highway 6 a few miles east of Clifton in 1966. Thelma's mother, Rosa, ran the fruit stand a number of years while Thelma was still working at the Cafe Caravan, and continued to do so until her death in 2000. Thelma got to know a lot of people through the fruit stand.

Other business ventures:

After a trip to South Carolina in 1987, Thelma and her sisters opened a store called The Three Sisters in the 500 block of Main Street in Grand Junction. Thelma did all of the accounting and her sister handled the buying and daily management of the store. It was a nice arrangement because she could work in the fruit stand during the summer and in the store in the winter. Freida was an artist and taught art classes in the back of the store. They were in business for 14 years, until Thelma's daughter became ill. For a short time, they had another nearby store known as The Avalon.

Community involvement and politics:

Thelma was always involved in the community. She served on the Farm Bureau board for 20 years. She has been involved with the Mesa Soil Conservation District for 12 – 13 years and is currently its President. In addition, Thelma was appointed by the County Commissioners to serve on the Agricultural Advisory Panel . Also, she served on an Agricultural Panel for Club 20.

Living on the river, Thelma has a vested interest in protecting it. She worked for two years with the Wild and Scenic Rivers conservation group. Thelma spoke of some difficulties she encountered with the Bureau of Reclamation several years ago when they were constructing the fish screen in the canal adjacent to her property and wanted to dump waste excavation material

on her land. Further investigation revealed the canal was partially built on her property and not entirely within the designated right-of-way. Thelma credits Greg Walcher, author of a book entitled "Smoking Them Out: The Theft of the Environment and How to Take It Back" with helping her through this conflict and ensuring she was being treated right. Walcher's book highlights problems encountered with the Bureau of Reclamation.

Thelma and Herb took a trip, following the Colorado River all the way from its source at Grand Lake to where it reaches the Pacific Ocean in Mexico. It was inspiring to learn about the variety of people who live along the river and depend on its water and to visit all of the dams along the way. On this trip, they saw the old Yuma prison, where there are pictures of how the river used to look when it flooded in that area.

Growing up in the area, Thelma knew Wayne Aspinall and went to school with his children. She gives Congressman Aspinall a lot of credit for preserving water rights along the Colorado and Gunnison Rivers. In her opinion, true environmental concerns have been hijacked by politics.

At one time, Thelma ran for the office of County Commissioner. She got 66 of the 130 votes needed to get on the ballot, but she did better than many others who ran for office. She felt this was a good experience.

Thelma currently belongs to the Columbine Club, a women's group which meets in Clifton every month and strives to have good, relevant speakers at their meetings.

Hobbies:

Throughout life, Thelma has been a bit of a workaholic. She liked being in business. She always liked to fish, and still fishes in the river near her house. She goes fishing at the lakes on Grand Mesa, and when she lived in Denver enjoyed fishing in the Leadville area. When their children were growing up they had boat, which they took to Lake Powell. Thelma enjoys playing golf and has been on women's bowling teams. She enjoys trips to Las Vegas to play blackjack. Thelma has always enjoyed spending time with her grandchildren.

Family memories:

In about 1970, Thelma's sister's husband became ill with schizophrenia at age 33. Since he had been in the military, he was able to go to a military mental hospital. The family was able to move her sister's mobile home onto their mother's property. At the time, Thelma and Herb had three boys, and her sister had four boys. It was interesting having seven boys between them, but they helped each other, raising their children together.

Overall, Thelma feels she has lived in the best of times. She and Herb raised their children in the manner in which they themselves were raised. Everyone worked together on the farm and later at the Café Caravan in Grand Junction, where they later became partial owners. Their children are now successful adults.

Thelma's daughter graduated from Mesa College when it was a two-year school and went back for a third year the next year when the school became a four-year college. Her daughter wanted to go to school for her last year somewhere further away from home, so through information she

found at the college library, she applied and was accepted at Bishops University in Lenoxville, Quebec, Canada. After college, she worked her way up to a public relations position with Occidental Oil Shale and then was successful a marketing director in the hotel and resort business in Steamboat Springs and Crested Butte.

Thelma's second son, Jack, got a job running casing and then selling tools in the oil field after he got out of high school. He was laid off but had a good pickup. He found and bought a good hydraulic pump and went into the pumping business. He pumped out manure ponds in Nebraska, pig farms in Utah, and sewers in California. After work in the oil fields picked up again, he pumped and piped water for a fracking team in Pennsylvania, North Dakota, and Greeley, Colorado. He did very well, and at the time he sold the business, he had 650 men working for him in four states.

Thelma is quite proud of her grandchildren. She and her husband always encouraged the six of them from the time they were young children to get along and play well together. This has served them well in life as adults.

Before Thelma's sister, Mary Ann, became ill, the sisters decided to take a trip. They flew to England to visit the living relatives and gravesites of their grandfather's family. Then they travelled to Germany where they saw their German relatives. During World War II, the families wrote letters back and forth, some of which had been censored by the British. Thelma's family here sent food to their German relatives and later on, care packages with items such as food and shoes. The grandson of one of Thelma's aunts comes to the United States periodically to visit. He is inspired by the scenery here and has sent them photo albums of pictures he has taken.

Summary by Gary Hines 04/26/2016